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The Year Of the Young Rebels

By Stephen Spender. 200 pp. New York: Random House. $4.95.

By JACK NEWFIELD

For some mysterious reason, perhaps psychological, perhaps literary, two women — Susan Sontag and Mary McCarthy — have written the two most honest and moving books I have read about North Vietnam. Similarly, the most evocative and perceptive prose I have read about the new student radicalism, oddly enough, has come from cultural and literary figures, rather than from political or educational ones. I have in mind Norman Mailer's "The Armies of the Night," essays by Richard Poirier and Martin Duberman published in the Atlantic magazine, and this gentle, wise book by the poet and critic, Stephen Spender.

The reason, I suspect, is that Spender and the other writers can see the personalities, confrontations and dreams of the young Left in larger than just its surface political dimension. Spender, for example, understands the cultural root of student alienation, that they are trying to change values and consciousness rather than lay down a program and seize state power. He understands they are trying to make *revolutionaries*, rather than make a *revolution*, that they are trying to create a "parallel world," in opposition to consumer cultures in which things manipulate individuals.

Spender also brilliantly sees the symbolic, stylistic, psychic and mythic layers of their politics. He calls one chapter "The Columbia Happenings," grasping the important role spontaneous anarchic energy plays in the movement. He perceives how much of the movement is based on gesture, myth and style, as well as the movement's close and subtle relationship with the ideas of sexual liberation, popular and underground culture and the theater of the absurd. He knows the real political significance of the epigrams and poetry chalked on the walls of the Sorbonne. He reminds us that the phrase, "Up against the wall," is literary, and comes from the poet LeRoi Jones. He comments on the significance of liberated sex, obscenity and the underground press as a kind of cultural politics.

Spender understands that the student occupations of Columbia and the Sorbonne were, since there is no "revolutionary situation" in the West, "a revolution rehearsal, like a war game." He can see this so clearly because he knows some things the students, with whom he so sympathizes, do not yet know. He knows they are probably doomed to failure. And he knows they will soon grow old.

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"The Year of the Young Rebels" is divided into seven chapters. The first four are first person, journalistic impressions of Spender's pilgrimages to Columbia, Paris, Prague and West Berlin, at the time of the student insurrections last year. The final three chapters are more speculative and analytical. They explore the common threads of student movements, West and East, and they thoughtfully rebut some of the older critics of the students, particularly George Kennan and Zbigniev Brzezinski.

The chapter on Columbia is lucid and fair-minded, without pretending to expertise or a false solidarity with the activists. Spender is especially astute in his observations about the black students, concluding:

"Their behavior was maturer (perhaps because they accepted the advice of older people) and less neurotic than that of the improvising white students. . . . The white students, as I have said, had a problem of identity which they resolved first by being students, secondly, more emphatically by being rebellious students. The black students, opposite here as in other respects, had a problem of losing their identity through segregation. Their identity is, of course, immensely real, in some ways the most real thing in America. . . . So if the neurosis of the white students is the fear that they have no identity, the passionate search to find one, that of the blacks is the fear that they will lose theirs, and beyond this the fear of actual extinction."

In his chapter on the Sorbonne, Spender emphasizes the special romantic and surrealist quality of the French students. He quotes the slogan "Imagination is Revolution," as an explanation of why the students rejected "the great trade unions, political parties, official communism." He frequently quotes with approval Daniel Cohn-Bendit, who seems to remind Spender of the anarchists he saw fighting in Spain 30 years ago.

The Czech students, however, are the ones who won the author's heart without cavil or reservation, since they are the most heroic, most tolerant and the most rooted in reality. Their movement was not a rehearsal or a game, but a now tragic matter of life and death. They were not fighting the materialism of a consumer culture, or the impersonal manipulations of a "formal democracy," but for the elemental freedoms the students at Columbia and the Sorbonne took for granted — free speech, free assembly, no censorship.

Spender approves of most that is really new and distinctive about this internationalist generation of rebels: their passion for community, authenticity and participation; their rejection of all existing models, parties and dogmas of the Old Left, especially the Soviet Union; their efforts to strike alliances with the young workers; their lack of selfishness, and their perseverance despite the absence of revolutionary situations. But he has one crucial, and I think justified, criticism to make. He warns the young rebels repeatedly not to destroy the university, not to see it as a simple and vulnerable microcosm of the larger society. He writes:

"Students who attempt to revolutionize society by first destroying the university are like an army which begins a war by wrecking its own base. . . . Thus the militant students should accept the university as their base. . . . without the university there would be no students. The position of the students, even as agitators, depends on there being a university. . . . To say, 'I won't have a university until society has a revolution,' is as though Karl Marx were to say, 'I won't go to the reading room of the British Museum until it has a revolution.'"

Stephen Spender has, of course, led a remarkable personal and public career. He belonged briefly to the British Communist party during the 1930's. (His essay in the collection "The God That Failed" convinced me personally, more than anything else written on the subject, of the futility of Communist dogma, of the illegitimacy of the Communist notion of the end justifying the means.) Later he was duped by the C.I.A., while he was co-editor of Encounter. He has survived these two potentially embittering experiences still a gentle radical, still a fine poet with a modest sensibility, a good man living in a bad time. ☐